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African Art and Bush-Negro Art

November 17 to December 5

FOREWORD

This collection has been loaned to the University Gallery by Mr. Melville Herskovits, well-known anthropologist and ethnologist of Northwestern University. He has made several field trips into these countries and personally collected from the natives the things on display. The University is very grateful to Mr. Herskovits for his generosity in loaning these objects of interest, and is fortunate in being able to hear him talk on "African Art and African Artists," November 21, at 4:30 o'clock, in the Music Auditorium.

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AFRICAN ART

As Robert Goldwater of New York University says, "It is still customary to begin any consideration of African Art with a statement in its defense. Although it is fifteen years since Roger Fry found himself compelled to admit that some of these things are great sculpture—'greater, I think, than anything we produce even in the Middle Ages,' it is still necessary to insist that Africa possesses one of the world's great sculptural traditions."

Knowledge of African art is still meager, but until we can understand the beauty in forms and surfaces alone, regardless of subject-matter, negro art will seem grotesque and distorted, and we will be amused, curious, or repelled according to our individual reactions. It is best understood by studying it directly, being willing to concede its right to its own expression. It is opposed to all that European art was and is. Its forms follow no academic rules and the best work is farthest removed from the European tradition. Those who have been trained in the belief that there is no beauty in the world of sculpture except Greek beauty of the fifth century will have a bad time. But those of us who enjoy letting the imagination play, those who are charmed by the mysterious, those who are interested in the unknowable, in the mysteries of life and death, those who make an ever changing attempt to interpret life—for us there will be a real emotional stirring when first we see African art.

The "Moderns," Matisse, Derain, Picasso, Vlaminck, and others became interested in this art because they saw in it what they were struggling for, but they—none of them—have been able to capture the perfect ease of the African's creation nor have they found the source of the primitive man's inspiration. Perhaps Archipenko, Brancusi, and Modigliani come the nearest to understanding it.

In all primitive peoples there is a certain similarity as is seen in the African art here displayed and the Bush-Negro of South America. In Africa, Oceania, Mexico, Peru the same evolution seems to take place. Little is known of the past lives of these peoples but there is a certain similarity springing from the same sources apparently—and the impulse to create is constant. Some like to compare the work of these primitive peoples with that of children of our own day. They say mankind today goes through the same evolution as the primitive but at a faster pace. However, artists tell us that there is a great difference between African symbolic art and the awkward, uncomposed, but fresh and spontaneous art of our children—that there are subtleties which even we, with all our knowledge and skill, cannot duplicate. That here is no hit or miss struggles; that it is not an unthinking, awkward technique. In fact there is the greatest technical proficiency, variety, and technical versatility. African gold masks, ivory and wood carvings, and the metal work are close contenders of Oriental art which until now has held this monopoly. The western civilized world has inherited an unfortunate legacy—a mistaken idea of what art is. It is unaware or insensitive to the beauty and power of symbolism, for our past education has taught us that if art isn't representational or naturalistic, it isn't art. Expressive symbols are natural to the greatest share of mankind in the world today, but we are blind to them.

Why does an African artist create? Traditions of ancestor worship and phallic symbolism motivate him. Cheney says, "These little idols, fetishes, and masks are direct expressions of religious emotion." The head of a household carves out the charms for the protection of his household. There is a taboo about letting anyone know he does this. He keeps it a secret because he would lose caste if anyone knew about it. However, there are gifted professional artists. They make bad husbands because they spend much time in the bush, seeking out new wood for their carvings and do not provide for their families.

Carving is done by the head of a household because if another carved the sacred image, he might carve into the god an evil influence or cast a bad charm about it. The African believes implicitly in the power of these things even over life and death. The life in which he lives is a mysterious one hedged in by fears and omens. There are plenty of cases where a man predicts his own death by days. The artist approaches his carving then feeling a power outside of himself stronger than himself. He approaches his work with humility—he knows he is of less importance than the figure he is carving. He loses his entity in the block of wood. He becomes only the agent by which his god is brought into his world; and with a reverent



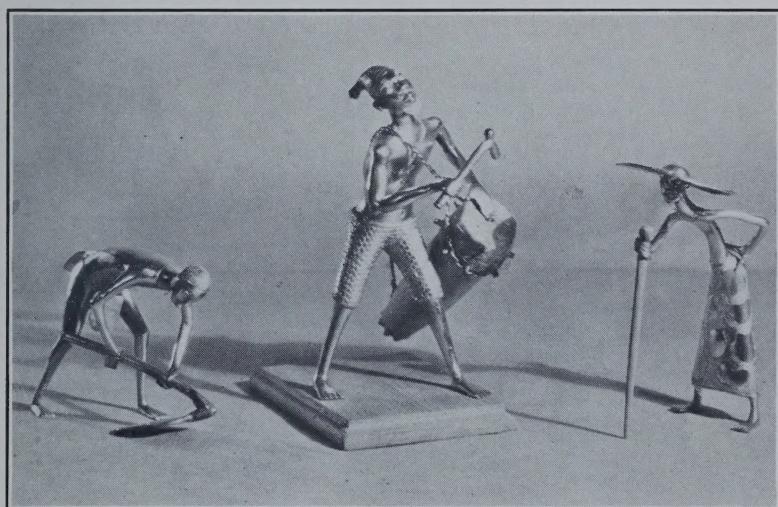
African Negro.—Twins are sacred in Africa. If one dies the living twin carries around an image of the dead one. He shares his food, his gifts, all he has with this image. ☙

and adoring attitude, freed from all extraneous influences (he does not think of technical tricks), radiating energy and faith he is guided by his instincts, to carve subconsciously, without artifice, and with only the understanding which is his alone—an understanding that life itself has given him. He is therefore, although human, under divine influence, a poet, a dreamer, a visionary, and the result combines to give his work uncontested artistic value. He creates instinctively and he produces fine sculptural quality. There are no artists who understand the nature of wood or metal so well. All men in Africa who carve their gods, obviously, are not artists, some are good craftsmen only, and some carvings made for European trade are rather bad. The European, not understanding the sacredness of the African's art and by bringing to him tools with which he could carve hurriedly for the

trade, has made it possible for the savage to take advantage of him. We only can understand what is false and what is true by allowing our emotions to dictate the beauty of an object.

There are three qualities characteristic of African sculpture: an originality of design, for the African's imagination is fertile; a complete understanding of the qualities of wood, its forms and its surfaces, coupled with a dexterity of execution; and the fact that nothing he does is created for "art's sake" but to supply some crying fundamental need of usefulness or of worship.

If we could understand on what his inspiration is founded, the mythology, the legend, his belief in the supernatural, and his unerring emphasis on essentials, he might teach us many things, not so that the European may become "a primitive," but for the purpose of enriching our experience, pushing out the walls of our imagination in order to catch and understand some of the great simplicities underlying life, enabling us to see with new eyes. The wellsprings of our lives have been clouded for some time; if we could sense the beauty and the poetry in these sincerely unself-conscious creations we might gain the freedom that would allow our fancy or imagination to play and which would eventually start an impulse to create, in our turn, out of the depths of our being.



African Negro.—These little figures might have come from some ultra-modern shop, they show the characteristics of the modern spirit so well. They are Dahoman images of brass.

To the African, sculpture was not the only way in which he could give vent to his esthetic impulses. Music, his ceremonies, the surging of his ritualistic chants, symbolic dancing to the sound of a drum, pipe, or rattle, which protect him and his family from evil, the telling of marvelous legends and myths about ancestors or spirits of the forest—these are a few of the ways in which the African expresses himself. The legends are to be learned accurately, then re-created and embroidered by each succeeding generation.

The incised calabash or gourd is an interesting form of art which these people practice. Used by a people who do not have a written language, the Negro carves designs on his calabashes which have special meanings. The designs may be allegorical or may express a proverb. It is hard for us to understand these meanings but one may represent determination, another a counsel of caution, still another may have a love motif, and one may have a fatalistic acceptance of the fact that in life good and bad exist side by side. These calabashes are prized for their decorative qualities and may, when sent to a friend or sweetheart, convey a particular message.

The making of appliquéd work and brass were arts practiced for the aristocracy and are luxury products, while wood carving was a necessity in the humblest household. Because no one was denied religious freedom, even the humblest slave could have his images. There is no adequate evidence that these people learned their art of appliquéd from the Europeans. Themes for banners, umbrellas, etc., are handed down from father to son. Men do this needlework; women are not permitted this self-expression, neither are they allowed to carve wood nor to look on the sacred images. The placing of the various units in the design on the appliqués has special significance—for instance, the placing of men over a tiger shows that they will overcome him.

Dahomey is the only province which has produced the little brass human figures, and brass casting has been developed with great skill. The Dahoman says brass came to him through contact with the European. However, he claims that iron was discovered by his forefathers from rock dug out of the cliffs and smelted, and that this is therefore his own invention. There are many theories about the development of brass casting. Perhaps it was learned from the Egyptians or voyagers, or perhaps even the Portuguese brought it in, but seeing the perfection with which it is executed, some people have been lead to believe that this art was born and developed in Africa and from there spread to the whole world. We only know that metal working was old in the fifteenth century in Dahomey. The method used in the casting of these little brass figures is the *ciré-perdue* method. Each figure is modeled in beeswax and enclosed in a clay mold. The mold is then dried in the sun, after which it is put into a furnace. The wax melts out. The metal is foundered and when in a liquid state, it is poured into the mold. The metal is then allowed to harden and cool, the clay is broken, and the bit of sculpture is then ready to be tooled and polished. Many of these metal pieces are made in pairs, perhaps because twins are sacred to the Dahoman. With this method of casting, it is easily seen what difficulty they have in making identical pieces.

The iron work is especially interesting. Ceremonial gongs, representations of snakes, handles for implements, handles on their ceremonial rattles, and bells were cast in iron. The articles shown here give some idea of the perfection of their workmanship. Again, note that these people understand the limitations and the strength which each material possesses, and use it in its fullest expression. The metal arts are practiced by guilds and the secret held very closely. Knowledge is handed down from father to son. The guild where ceremonial and decorative pieces were made had quarters close to the ruler. This gold, silver, and brass work was a luxury possessed only by the wealthy or ruling class.

In Africa, clothes are few, and tattooing became quite an art. Designs were cut into the skin and the wound made to heal in scarred ridges by rubbing ashes into it. Elaborate feather-decorated coiffures (often on wooden framework), gold masks of all kinds, the decoration of the body, the brass rings, lip plugs, and neck bands all have interest to us and indicate that these people gave great attention to applied decoration as well as to sculptural art. Cups used to hold the palm kernels which were used in divining, divining boards and divining rods, canoe paddle handles—even the poorest household utensils—came in for their share of decoration. Only families of position and wealth could afford to have carved stools. A man carried an incised cane or wand which bore the carved totemic or symbolic animal. This served as a handle to swing over his shoulder.

The significance of masks, fetishes, and religious ceremonies are complete studies in themselves, and, in such a limited comment as this, cannot be more than noted in passing, but they are a vital part of the lives of these people.

The Dahoman artist understands the medium in which he works, and does not try to go beyond it. His work has a naïve quality, it is true, but it also has great strength, much subtlety, and real sophistication. He demonstrates a quality in his work which Europeans have almost lost, for his is a tactful art. It is made to be touched and felt.

Let us then look at this art not in relation to its admitted influence on modern art, but in terms of its own right and realize that it has an affinity with the oldest artistic expressions of mankind of which we have any knowledge.

THE BUSH-NEGRO

If a person stirs up a hole, he will find what is in it.

—Bush-Negro proverb.

The Bush-Negroes are often confused with the Negroes who live in Africa or the Bushmen who live in Australia. These Bush-Negroes live in isolation in the interior of Dutch Guiana, South America. They are the descendants of run-away slaves from Africa who "took to the bush" and carried on their African customs and traditions much in the same manner as they had done across the water. Through the seventeenth century, they increased in number to such an extent, that by the eighteenth century they were making raids upon the white men and causing the Dutch so much trouble that a treaty giving them freedom was made with them.



Bush-Negro Stools.—On the left the design resembles the headrest of the Egyptians from which it undoubtedly is derived.

They are composed of three tribes, the Saramacca, Awaka, and Boni. The original stock was from various West African provinces, but on the new continent they mingled blood with the English, French, Dutch, Danish, Spanish, and Portuguese, who became their rulers. They absorbed a varied amount of culture from these peoples, and also came into contact with the aboriginal Indians with whom they mixed, and in the last few years, they have had contact with the Hindu and Javanese laborers who have been brought to the colony. The fallacy that these people are savages without culture and without keen minds is one which must be corrected. The idea that they are a childlike, carefree people has been widely accepted, but in reality, they are clever, subtle, and cunning.

The interesting thing is that these Negroes have many of the same religious beliefs as the Negroes in Africa, and the United States. Many of the names for their gods are the same as those on the Gold Coast; they hold many of the same things sacred. Their dancing also resembles the dancing of the "saints" who "shout" in the Negro churches of the United States; they beat their drums, and go through the same incantations as in

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Africa. These people live and think today much as the Negro who was brought from Africa to other parts of the New World acts and thinks.

The structure of the language of this people is essentially African, with a mingling of words taken from the various peoples, the Dutch, English, French, and Portuguese, who were their masters.

The design forms which these people use have meaning, but they are careful not to divulge the secret of their meaning, especially to the white man, for he is an enemy of long standing. A rule not to tell more than half they know is religiously adhered to. A belief in magic and a confidence in charms is derived directly from their African forefathers.

Little is known of these people, and not much has been written about them. Melville Herskovits spent two summers in the bush. With his wife, Frances Herskovits, who spent one summer there, material was gathered for a most delightful story, *Rebel Destiny*, in which the customs and manners of this people is re-created for our entertainment and instruction.

They are now working on a monograph giving scientific data concerning these people. Phonographic records of the songs and chants have been made. Various articles on this music have been published by Mrs. Herskovits. When the monograph is finally completed it will add much to our knowledge of the South American Bush-Negro.

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Bush-Negro.—The fetishes and charms of the African and Bush-Negro are similar.